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# HUME ON CAUSATION

## *(Part 2 of 2)*

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Text source:

*Enquiry Concerning Human  
Understanding*, section 7 part 2

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## RECALL HUME'S NEGATIVE THESIS: WE NEVER OBSERVE ANY CAUSAL POWER

- “All events seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another; but we can never observe any tie between them. They seem *conjoined*, but never *connected*. And as we have no idea of any thing, which never appeared to our outward sense or inward sentiment, the necessary conclusion *seems* to be that we have no idea of connexion or power at all, and that these words are absolutely without any meaning, when employed either in philosophical reasonings, or common life.”

(ECHU section 7 paragraph 26)

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# GROPING TOWARD THE POSITIVE

## THESIS: WHEN DO WE USE CAUSAL TALK?

- “But there still remains one method of avoiding this conclusion, and one source which we have not yet examined. When any natural object or event is ever presented, it is impossible for us, by any sagacity or penetration, to discover, or even conjecture, without experience, what event will result from it ... **But when one particular species of event has always, in all instances, been conjoined with another, we make no longer any scruple of foretelling one upon the appearance of the other** ... We then call the one object **Cause**; the other, **Effect**. We suppose, that there is some connexion between them; some power in the one, by which it infallibly produces the other, and operates with the greatest certainty, and the strongest necessity.” (ECHU 7.27)
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## THE DIFFERENCE THAT AN OBSERVED *SERIES* OF REGULARLY CONJOINED EVENTS MAKES:

- “It appears, then, that this idea of necessary connexion among events arises from a number of similar instances, which occur, of the constant conjunction of these events; nor can that idea ever be suggested by any one of these instances, surveyed in all possible lights and positions. But there is nothing in a number of instances, different from every single instance, which is supposed exactly similar; **except only, that after a repetition of similar instances, the mind is carried by habit, upon the appearance of the one event, to expect its usual attendant, and to believe, that it will exist.**”

(ECHU 7.28)

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## THE POSITIVE THESIS: CAUSAL JUDGMENTS EXPRESS A TENDENCY OF MIND TO ASSOCIATE CONSTANTLY CONJOINED EVENTS

- “This connexion, therefore, which we **feel** in the mind, this customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant, is the sentiment or impression, from which we form the idea of power or necessary connexion. Nothing farther is in the case. ... This is the sole difference between one instance, from which we can never receive the idea of connexion, and a number of similar instances, by which it is suggested. ... **When we say, therefore, that one object is connected with another, we mean only, that they have acquired a connexion in our thought** ... A conclusion which will seem somewhat extraordinary; but which seems founded on sufficient evidence.” (ECHU 7.28)
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# THE POSITIVE ACCOUNT OF OUR IDEA OF CAUSATION

- So all there is to our idea of causation is...
  - (i) An observed constant conjunction of As and Bs, and
  - (ii) A change in the mind via habit, so that the mind now expects Bs to follow As.

[See Hume's official 'definitions' of cause in ECHU 7.29]

- Note: So our idea of causation includes nothing about any ***causal necessity out in the world***: nothing that could explain why A-events are always followed by B-events.
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# AN IMPORTANT QUESTION OF INTERPRETATION:

- Is Hume saying that all there is to causation is (i) observed regularities plus (ii) the mind's habit-induced associative expectations?

*(After all, Hume says this is the only idea of causation we have.)*

- Or just that this is all we can ever know of causation? (Maybe there are real causal necessities out there in the world, its just that we can never observe them in experience?)
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